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THE GRAVEYARD AND THE ROBIN WILLIAMS

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Revised Edition (2026)

to everyone who loves thriller's

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Preface

Some doors are not meant to be found.
Others are found because they are hungry.
Every town has places people avoid without knowing why. A cemetery no one visits. A tree no one names. A ruin blamed on time, gas leaks, accidents. We call it coincidence because the truth asks too much of us.

This story begins in one such town, where routines are safe and questions are optional. Where children play football beside graves and believe monsters only exist in books. Where history is buried carefully, layer by layer, until forgetting feels natural.

But forgetting is not safety.

The Hollow does not sleep. It waits. It learns. It chooses.

Seven gates were built to contain it. Seven families sworn to guard them. Bloodlines, rituals, sacrifices, lies. Over time, guardians became cowards. Cowards became traitors. And the gates began to open.

This is not a story about heroes born special.

It is a story about ordinary people who saw something they weren't meant to see and were marked for it.

What follows is a descent. Into memory. Into fear. Into the spaces between truth and illusion. Each gate demands a price, and the Hollow never takes the same thing twice.

Read carefully.

Pay attention to what is remembered and what is lost.

Because once the gates begin to open,
the only thing more dangerous than dying
is forgetting who you are.
The Hollow is watching.

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Finally, I thank the readers. Your time, attention, and willingness to engage with this story give it purpose beyond this page.

Karl's Life

Karl was a normal schoolboy, living in a quiet suburban neighborhood where life moved at a comfortable, predictable pace. His home was a two-story house tucked neatly between identical houses on the same street, with a small front garden that his mother insisted on keeping perfectly trimmed. The hedges were always straight, the lawn immaculate, and a few rose bushes added a splash of color in spring. Inside, the house smelled faintly of fresh bread and detergent, a comforting combination that made it feel lived-in and safe.

He lived with his parents and younger sister, Clara, who was ten and full of energy, often zipping through the house with an endless stream of questions and laughter. Karl's mother, a schoolteacher, was strict yet affectionate. She demanded order and discipline, but there was warmth in the way she fussed over Karl's homework or tucked Clara into bed. His father worked at the local bank, a reliable man with a calm presence who preferred evenings spent reading the newspaper in his armchair to any kind of excitement. Their life was structured, almost like clockwork—breakfast at 7 a.m., school by 8, dinner at 8:30, and lights out by 10. Weekends had their own rhythm: Saturday morning chores, Saturday afternoon football, Sunday walks to the park, and Sunday evening homework sessions.

Karl's days were largely predictable, and he liked it that way. He wasn't exceptional at studies, nor particularly bad, somewhere squarely in the middle where teachers were satisfied and classmates barely noticed him. But there was one thing about Karl that made him different from almost everyone else: an obsession with mysteries. His fascination went beyond casual curiosity. He collected detective comics, true crime magazines, and even old case files he found online, printing them obsessively and filing them meticulously in folders. His small room was a shrine to the mysterious and the unsolved. The walls were plastered with cutouts of infamous cases, newspaper clippings, and hand-drawn timelines of puzzling crimes. A magnifying glass rested on his desk beside a notepad full of scribbled clues and speculations. Karl had always dreamed of becoming a detective—not just one with a badge, but one who could pierce through the fog of the unexplainable, uncover truths that others would overlook, and bring justice to shadows.

His best friends—Nico, Alin, and Rayen—were the only ones who truly understood this side of him. The four were inseparable, having grown up together in the same neighborhood. Every day after school, they met at the open field just beyond the cul-de-sac. It was a wide, grassy expanse where they played football until the sun dipped low, the sky painting itself in shades of orange and pink. Beyond the field, a quiet road separated them from an old cemetery. The cemetery was serene during the day; birds chirped in the branches of tall, leaning trees, and the wind whispered softly across the graves. The tombstones, some crumbling and moss-covered, told stories of lives long past, faded names etched deep into weathered stone. Most people ignored it entirely, hurrying past with hurried steps

or solemn glances. The boys, however, found it intriguing. They jokingly called it "Ghoul Garden" and teased each other about ghosts and spirits, but none of them truly believed in anything supernatural. It was just a game—a way to make their afternoons more thrilling.

Until one day, everything changed.

Game Near the Graveyard

It was a Thursday afternoon, just before sunset. The sky was painted in shades of deep orange and soft pink, the kind of light that stretched long shadows across the field. The warm glow made the grass seem golden, the air thick with the smell of late summer earth. The boys were in the middle of a match, their shouts and laughter echoing across the open space. Karl was the goalkeeper, crouched low, eyes sharp and ready. Alin patrolled the defense, moving with a steady, confident rhythm. Nico and Rayen were forwards, dashing back and forth, kicking up clouds of dust with each sprint. Sweat dripped from their foreheads, soaking their shirts, but none of them wanted to stop. The game was alive with energy—the kind of careless joy that only youth could hold.

Then, almost silently, a black car appeared.
It rolled smoothly along the quiet road bordering the field, its sleek frame glinting in the fading sunlight. The windows were tinted so dark that the boys could not see inside. The car's presence felt out of place, sharp against the sleepy, suburban calm. The boys instinctively slowed, glancing toward it. Nico, ever the curious one, squinted and raised a hand to shield his eyes.

"Look at that," he muttered, voice low. "That's a rich man's

car."

The car came to a stop near the edge of the graveyard. The engine cut off, leaving only the soft rustle of leaves in the wind. Four men in black suits stepped out in perfect unison. Their movements were stiff and precise, like trained soldiers or machines. Faces expressionless, eyes hidden behind dark glasses. They carried themselves with an unnatural stillness, radiating a cold professionalism that made the boys shiver.

Then, a fifth figure emerged. The sight made Karl's stomach tighten. It was a man in a wheelchair, pale as paper, frail and thin. Sunken eyes stared ahead with a hollow emptiness, and the lines of his face were drawn tight, as though he had been drained of life itself. He moved slowly, pushed by the silent men in suits, and something about his presence made the air feel heavier.

"Is that guy… okay?" Alin whispered, voice barely audible, as if saying it louder would summon some hidden danger.

The boys watched, rooted to the spot, as the men wheeled him slowly into the graveyard. One of them carried a black case, handled with careful precision. Another turned abruptly, his gaze sweeping across the field, and Karl felt the weight of it—cold, empty, piercing. The man's eyes locked on his own, and for a fleeting second, Karl felt something deep inside him shift—a tension that had no name, a warning that something was profoundly wrong.

Then—a gunshot.

The sound cut through the warm air like a jagged knife. It was sharp, sudden, and terrifying, echoing off the gravestones in a deafening crack. Birds scattered from the trees, their wings beating frantically, and the boys froze, hearts hammering in unison.

Time seemed to stretch. One second, then two, then instinct took over. Fear surged like electricity. Without a word, they bolted, legs pumping as adrenaline surged through them, carrying them away from the field, away from the black car, away from whatever danger had descended upon the quiet suburb.

The News

Karl didn't tell his parents. None of the boys did. The secret weighed on them like a stone in the chest, heavy and oppressive. That night, Karl lay in bed staring at the ceiling, the thin glow of the streetlight filtering through the blinds. Every shadow seemed to move, every creak of the house amplified in the darkness. He could not get the image out of his mind—the black car, sleek and silent, the men in sharp suits moving like shadows, the frail man in the wheelchair, and the graveyard stretching cold and silent under the dying light of the sun.

And the gunshot. That single, explosive sound kept echoing in his head. Sharp, terrifying, unreal. He remembered how the air had felt, thick and heavy, how his heart had slammed in his chest. He kept turning it over, wondering if his eyes had tricked him, if his imagination had taken control. But deep down, Karl knew it had happened. That sound wasn't something the mind invented. It was real.

He tossed and turned for hours, his thoughts racing faster than he could catch. Clara's soft breathing from the room next door, the faint ticking of the kitchen clock, the occasional car passing by outside—they all blended into a surreal soundtrack for his sleepless night. By the time dawn crept through the

blinds, Karl felt hollow, drained, yet unable to shake the sense that something far larger than him had just begun.

The next evening, Karl sat on the worn couch in the living room, half-listening to the television as his father sipped chai beside him. The soft clinking of the spoon against the cup and the sweet smell of cardamom offered a small comfort, but Karl barely noticed. His mind was elsewhere, still replaying the events of yesterday, each detail sharper and more vivid than the last.

Then, a name jolted him upright, making the cup of chai tremble slightly in his father's hand.

"Breaking News," the anchor said, voice steady but urgent. "Billionaire businessman Robin Williams has been reported missing for two days. Authorities now believe he may have been kidnapped. If anyone has any information, they are urged to contact the police."

A photo appeared on the screen.

Karl froze. His stomach sank, and his pulse hit his throat.

It was him.

The man in the wheelchair.

The one he had seen in the graveyard, fragile and pale.

The one whose life had hung in the balance in a moment that seemed like a blur.

And now… the one he might have heard die.

Karl's hands trembled slightly as he gripped the edge of the couch. The room felt impossibly quiet, though the news droned on. Everything suddenly felt sharper, darker, more real. He didn't move. He couldn't. A sense of fear, disbelief, and a strange, rising determination swirled inside him. Something had shifted in his world. Something he could not ignore.

Karl's Obsession

After the news broadcast, Karl couldn't focus on anything. School became a haze of noise and movement he barely registered. Lessons blurred together—math problems, history dates, grammar rules—they all felt distant, irrelevant. He couldn't concentrate on classwork, couldn't laugh at jokes with his friends, couldn't enjoy football. Every ball kicked, every cheer shouted on the field, felt meaningless compared to the image that haunted him relentlessly: Robin Williams' face, pale, sunken, and lifeless, etched into his mind like a photograph burned into glass.

By the time he got home each day, Karl's world had narrowed to one thing. He began researching.

Late at night, long after his parents had gone to bed and Clara's soft snores filled the house, Karl sat at his desk under the dim yellow light of his lamp. His room, usually a comforting clutter of comics, files, and case notes, now felt like a command center. He read every news article about Robin Williams' disappearance, scrolling, printing, and highlighting details obsessively. Timelines were pinned to his wall, photos lined up in careful rows, and even old interviews from years ago were replayed and analyzed frame by frame. Curiosity had always driven him, but this—this was something deeper. It became an

obsession.

Patterns began to emerge. Robin had enemies, business rivals, lawsuits stacked like towers against him. Karl noted names, dates, and connections in his small notebook. He discovered that Robin had even distanced himself from his son, Lucas, a few years ago after a bitter legal dispute. The name Lucas Williams lingered in Karl's mind, like a loose thread he couldn't ignore. Every time he wrote it down, a shiver ran through him.

One night, after hours of researching, Karl fell into a fitful sleep at his desk. His dreams were vivid, almost painfully so. He was back in the graveyard. But it wasn't quiet anymore. The sky was an angry red, clouds swirling like smoke above the headstones. The grass was dark, damp, almost black, and the graves were open, yawning like mouths waiting to swallow the earth. A pale hand emerged from one of the graves, skeletal and shaking slightly, pointing directly at him. His chest tightened as he looked closer, and behind the hand, he saw Robin—eyes wide, mouth moving as if trying to speak, but no sound reached him. The image seared itself into Karl's mind, leaving him gasping when he woke.

He sat upright, drenched in sweat, heart hammering. The room felt too still, the shadows of his shelves looming over him like silent witnesses. He knew he couldn't ignore it. He had to go back. He had to see for himself, to understand what he had stumbled upon.

But not alone.

The Pact

That Saturday, Karl invited Nico, Alin, and Rayen to his place. They lounged in his room as usual, sprawled across beanbags and the worn carpet, pretending to browse comics and play handheld games. Posters of famous detectives stared down from the walls, and the faint smell of paper and ink filled the air. But Karl had another plan. His fingers tapped nervously against the edge of his desk as he waited for the right moment.

"I need to show you something," he said finally, shutting the door with a soft click that seemed louder than usual in the quiet room.

He pulled out a thick folder, the edges worn from hours of handling. Inside were printed news articles, timelines, photos, and handwritten notes. He laid them carefully on his desk, spreading them out like a map of a hidden world. Slowly, he explained everything—the black car, the men in suits, the man in the wheelchair, the graveyard, and the shocking news broadcast about Robin Williams. Each word hung in the air, heavy and charged.

The others listened quietly, the usual chatter and laughter replaced with a tense, almost fearful silence. Rayen was the first to break it.

"You're saying we saw a billionaire get murdered?" he asked,

voice low, almost a whisper.

"No," Karl replied, shaking his head. "I think we saw something… bigger."

The room grew still, each boy lost in his own thoughts. The gravity of Karl's words settled over them, thick and suffocating.

Karl looked each of them in the eye, his own gaze sharp, determined. "I'm going back to the graveyard. Tonight."

Alin's hands trembled as he clenched them together. "That's insane," he muttered, the words more a reflex than a warning.

"I'm not asking you to come," Karl said firmly. "But I have to go. I need to know what's really happening."

After a tense pause, Nico stood up, his voice steady, eyes unwavering. "You're not going alone."

Rayen's nod was almost imperceptible but full of resolve. "If something happens, we stick together. No one goes off alone."

Alin hesitated, biting his lip, weighing the danger. Then he let out a slow sigh. "Alright. But we go prepared. No improvising. We plan everything."

That night, the boys packed carefully. Flashlights with extra batteries, small pocket knives, a first aid kit, rope, and even Nico's camera—just in case they needed evidence. Karl's instructions were precise; they moved with the quiet efficiency of a team who knew the stakes were higher than a typical midnight adventure. Karl told his parents he was staying at Rayen's, a half-truth that felt safer than explaining anything else. The others did the same.

By 11 p.m., the four of them stood at the edge of the graveyard.

A thick fog had rolled in, curling around gravestones like ghostly fingers. The air was colder than usual, biting at their skin and carrying the faint scent of damp earth and decaying leaves. The graves loomed, dark shapes in the mist, shadows

that seemed to twitch and shift as they stepped closer.

Flashlights in hand, the boys exchanged brief, tense glances before taking the first cautious steps onto the uneven ground. Every crunch of leaves beneath their shoes echoed unnaturally, swallowed immediately by the dense fog.

And then the night swallowed them whole.

The Graveyard Return

The graveyard looked different at night. In daylight it had seemed quiet, almost harmless, but now the silence felt deeper, heavier, like a weight pressing down on their chests. Fog rolled low along the ground, thick and slow, curling around gravestones as if it had a will of its own. Tall statues of angels and saints loomed out of the mist, their stone faces worn smooth by time, eyes blank and watchful. Shadows clung to every corner, stretching and shifting with each movement of the fog.

The boys stood just inside the rusted iron gate, its hinges groaning softly behind them as it settled shut. For a moment, none of them moved. The graveyard felt vast and unfamiliar, as though it had expanded in the darkness.

Karl broke the silence by stepping forward. His voice was quiet but steady. "We need to find that spot. The one where they took him."

They began to walk slowly, careful with each step. Their flashlights cast thin, trembling beams through the mist, illuminating fragments of the path ahead while leaving everything else swallowed by darkness. Gravel crunched beneath their shoes, mixed with the dry crackle of dead leaves. Somewhere in the distance, an owl hooted, the sound echoing unnaturally

through the rows of graves. The air smelled of damp stone, rotting leaves, and old soil, a scent that clung to their throats.

Nico's camera hung heavily around his neck. After a moment's hesitation, he lifted it and hit record. The small red light blinked to life. "If something happens," he murmured, trying to sound calm, "at least we'll have proof."

As they moved deeper into the graveyard, the temperature dropped noticeably. The warmth of the day was gone, replaced by a sharp cold that seeped through their clothes. Each breath came out in pale clouds, quickly swallowed by the fog. Karl scanned the surroundings carefully, his heart beating faster as familiar shapes began to emerge from the darkness.

Then he saw it.

The tree. Twisted, old, its branches clawing at the sky like skeletal fingers. It stood beside the same patch of earth where the black car had parked that evening. Karl slowed, then stopped.

"Here," he said quietly. "This is where it happened." They gathered closer, their flashlights converging on the ground. And immediately, it was clear that something was wrong. The earth was uneven, the soil darker and looser than the surrounding ground. As they stepped nearer, the truth became impossible to ignore. A grave had been dug there—and then filled back in hastily. There was no name on a headstone. No flowers. No marker of any kind. No sign of love, mourning, or remembrance. Just disturbed earth, raw and careless, as if whatever had been placed there was never meant to be found. Suddenly, Nico's camera screen flickered. The image warped for a split second before stabilizing again.

"Battery's full," he muttered, frowning as he checked it. "But it's flickering."

Then they heard it.

A whisper.

So faint it almost blended with the wind. So soft it could have been imagined.

"He's watching."

The words brushed against them like a cold breath.

The boys froze instantly. No one spoke. No one moved. The fog seemed to thicken around them, pressing closer, muting the world beyond their small circle of light.

Rayen slowly turned his head, eyes wide, scanning the darkness behind them. His voice trembled as he spoke. "Did you hear that?"

The Shadows Stir

The chapel door creaked open with a long, drawn-out groan, as if protesting their entry. The boys exchanged tense glances, but Karl stepped inside first. The air was heavy, musty, and thick with dust. The chapel's interior was hollow and broken; the wooden pews were rotting, splintering under the slightest touch, and cobwebs clung to every corner. Tiny motes of dust floated in the faint beams of their flashlights, dancing like restless spirits.

Candles that had once lit the room had long since melted into waxy stalagmites, fused into the stone floors and windowsills. The altar at the far end was blackened with soot, as though a fire had raged there once, burning not wood but something far older and darker. Shadows clung to the corners, pooling in the arches and corners like liquid ink.

Then Nico's voice cut through the silence, sharp and shaky. "Guys… look."

The others turned toward him. His flashlight trembled in his hands, illuminating a symbol scrawled across the wall in dried, dark blood. It was grotesque—a spiral of thorns encircling an open eye, jagged and menacing, as though it had been etched by claws rather than a pen.

Karl's breath caught in his throat. He leaned closer, eyes

narrowing. “It matches one of the ones I saw in the article,” he whispered, voice low, almost reverent. “On Robin’s ring.”

The air shifted suddenly, carrying with it a chill that made their skin crawl. Then—a scream.

It came from outside, shrill and terrified. Alin spun toward the door, heart hammering. “Rayen?” he shouted.

But Rayen was gone.

Without hesitation, they raced outside, flashlights cutting through the thickening fog. The graveyard looked the same at first, familiar yet distorted, but now something was profoundly wrong. The fog itself seemed alive, twisting and swirling around them. Shapes began to emerge: one tall figure, then another, and then many, moving slowly, deliberately, like shadows taking form.

The statues they had passed before were no longer still. The angel near the front wept a dark, viscous blood that dripped onto the stone floor. A nearby saint statue held its own severed head, eyes frozen in a silent scream. The boys froze, stomachs churning, as if the very world around them had turned against them.

Then, one of the graves split open with a cracking sound that made their teeth chatter. Soil tumbled away like liquid darkness, and a pale, clawed hand broke the surface. It dug at the earth, scraping as it rose, fingers bent unnaturally, reaching outward as if seeking something—or someone.

The boys’ flashlights trembled in their grip, and the beam landed on the hand. Their breaths came in shallow gasps. Every instinct screamed to run, but something in Karl—something that had haunted him since the first sighting of Robin—kept him rooted in place, staring at the horror that was emerging from the grave.

The Unseen Watcher

Panic hit like a thunderclap.

"Karl, RUN!" Alin shouted, his voice cracking with terror.

Nico's hands fumbled, and his camera slipped from his grasp, clattering against the stone floor. Before he could retrieve it, another pale, clawed hand burst from the ground, snatching at his leg. He kicked instinctively, stumbling back, and then sprinted toward the chapel, heart hammering in his chest.

From the mist behind them came a sound that made their blood run cold—chains scraping across stone, slow and deliberate, accompanied by a soft, almost melodic humming that seemed impossibly human, yet utterly wrong.

They didn't stop to question it. They ran toward the chapel, lungs burning, adrenaline carrying them faster than their legs should have allowed. Reaching the heavy wooden doors, they slammed them shut, the metal latch rattling under the pressure of something massive pounding against it from the other side.

Inside, the air was thick with dust and the coppery scent of old blood. Shadows stretched and warped along the walls, as if alive. From the darkness behind the altar, a figure stepped forward.

"You returned," a voice said, calm and unnerving, echoing across the empty chapel.

A man emerged fully into the flickering flashlight beams. Young, tall, impeccably dressed in a black suit, hair slicked back perfectly, but his eyes—empty, cold, unfeeling—held nothing human.

"Karl…" he said softly, and recognition hit like ice. "Lucas."

Karl's stomach turned. He had seen the name, heard it whispered in his thoughts, but now it belonged to this figure. Lucas smiled, a slow, cruel twist of his lips.

"You saw too much," he said. "That makes you part of this."

Nico raised a trembling hand. "Where's Rayen?"

Lucas didn't answer. He simply gestured toward a side door. It creaked open on its own, revealing the room beyond. There, tied to a stone altar, was Rayen. Symbols were carved into the floor and walls around him, sharp, twisted sigils that seemed to pulse faintly in the candlelight. A dagger lay beside him, its edge catching what little light remained.

Karl's heart pounded as he swallowed.

"The Hollow Grave must be fed," Lucas said calmly. "Every hundred years. Five souls. That's the pact. My father tried to stop it… so I stopped him."

Karl's voice shook, raw and furious. "You killed your own father!"

"He was weak," Lucas replied simply, as if it were fact, not crim e.

Suddenly, the chapel erupted in chaos. Stained glass shattered, raining fragments onto the stone floor. Wind roared through the broken windows, tearing at their clothes, carrying with it the scent of wet earth and brimstone. From the floor beneath them, cracks began to form, glowing with an unnatural red light, as if the earth itself were alive and screaming.

Karl's eyes fell on the dagger beside Rayen. His instincts

screamed at him, and he lunged.

Lucas stepped back, his eyes narrowing. "You don't understand what you're doing."

But it was too late. Karl gripped the hilt, lifted the blade, and slashed his own hand across the palm. Blood welled instantly, dripping onto the altar, dark and warm. The earth trembled violently beneath their feet.

A roar erupted from below, deep and monstrous, shaking the walls of the chapel. Dust and debris rained from the ceiling. And then… the gate.

The heavy iron gates of the graveyard began to creak open on their own, swinging slowly, deliberately, as if something ancient and terrible was waiting beyond, eager to enter.

The Guardian Awakens

The crack beneath the altar widened with an eerie groan, the stone splitting like paper under invisible pressure. Then something emerged. A monstrous claw shot up first—skeletal yet armored, as if forged from a dark, ancient metal. It gripped the edge of the altar, dragging the rest of the creature into view.

It was enormous—twice the size of a man. Its body was a grotesque fusion of bone and muscle, ridged with jagged spines. Its skull was fused with long, twisted horns, and its chest bore carvings that pulsed with a deep, red light, ancient runes etched as though by ritual fire. Smoke hissed from its nostrils with every shallow, guttural breath.

Lucas's voice broke the stunned silence, low and reverent. "The Guardian of the Hollow," he whispered, almost in awe. The boys froze, eyes wide with terror, as the creature fully pulled itself from the pit. Its glowing blue eyes scanned the chapel, glowing brighter as it took in the four intruders. Chains dangled from its limbs, dragging against the stone floor, each step reverberating like a minor earthquake. Dust and debris fell from the ceiling with each tremor.

Alin's voice cracked as he stumbled backward. "We need to stop it… before it gets loose!"

Lucas laughed, a sound without joy or warmth, chilling in its

certainty. "You've already failed. Your blood opened the gate. It's bound now—to you."

Karl felt a sudden, searing heat on his hand. The mark left by the dagger throbbed violently, pulsing in time with the Guardian's movements. The blade he had used began to glow red, humming like it had a life of its own, as if feeding on the ritual he had unwittingly completed.

Nico didn't hesitate. He dashed to Rayen, slicing through the ropes with shaking hands. "Come on! Move!"

But then—the Guardian turned. Its glowing eyes locked on Karl. The air seemed to still, the dust suspended in midair. Its massive claw lowered slowly, and the chains rattled against the floor like a sinister melody.

And then, impossibly, it bowed.

Not in aggression. Not in attack. But in a gesture that was almost… reverent.

Karl's heart raced. Every instinct screamed danger, yet the Guardian's bow seemed deliberate, tied to something far older than fear or fury. The pulsing red light from the dagger cast long shadows across the chapel, dancing across the runes etched in the beast's chest. It was bound to him—but in a way he didn't yet understand.

The boys stared, frozen, as the air itself seemed to hum with the presence of something ancient, terrible… and obedient.

The Truth

Lucas began to chant, his voice low at first, then rising in intensity. The words were guttural, sharp, and ancient—letters and syllables Karl did not recognize, yet each carried a weight that made the very air tremble. The symbols etched around the altar flared with an unholy light, glowing a sickly red that cast long, shifting shadows across the walls.

The chapel shuddered violently. Dust and small fragments of stone fell from the crumbling ceiling, sprinkling onto the altar and the boys below. Every vibration thrummed through the floorboards, rattling their teeth and hearts alike.

"You think I killed my father for power?" Lucas growled, his voice low and venomous. "I did it because he was afraid. He abandoned the bloodline."

Karl's hands tightened around the dagger. The hilt vibrated, pulsing with the same red light that now bathed the altar. "You said this happens every hundred years," he said, voice steady despite the fear gnawing at his chest.

"Yes," Lucas replied, his tone almost reverent now. "And the fifth sacrifice… must be willing. You broke the cycle. You bonded the Guardian to yourself."

The beast stirred behind him. Its massive head lowered toward Karl, eyes glowing blue and fixated. Chains dragged

from its enormous limbs, scraping the stone floor in a harsh, metallic rhythm. The Guardian's growl resonated through the chapel, a deep, primal sound that made the boys' stomachs lurch.

Then it began—visions. Karl's mind was flooded with images, unbidden, overwhelming. He saw the past hundred years replaying in fragments: dark rituals in forgotten chapels, children taken in the dead of night, families cursed and shattered. He saw Robin Williams, frail but determined, standing in this very chapel, trying desperately to destroy the altar. And he saw Lucas stopping him, hands coated in blood, eyes cold with conviction.

"You're not a priest," Karl said, his voice rising with a mix of fear and defiance. "You're a murderer."

Lucas hissed, stepping closer, shadows flickering across his face in the dancing red light. "I am the chosen," he spat, eyes burning with fanaticism.

The air thickened around them. The Guardian shifted, chains rattling like a storm, while the pulsing dagger in Karl's hand seemed to synchronize with the heartbeat of the earth beneath the chapel. The walls themselves felt alive, humming with the ancient, terrible power Lucas had awakened.

Karl's mind raced. Every instinct screamed to fight, to flee, but something deeper told him that the Guardian's allegiance was now the key—the one fragile tether between the boys and the unimaginable power Lucas sought to unleash.

The Sacrifice

The ceiling above groaned and cracked, stones falling like rain. A sudden blast of moonlight poured through the gaping hole, cutting through the red glow that had consumed the chapel. The wind howled through the broken windows, whipping dust and debris around the altar, and the Guardian answered with a deafening, earth-shaking howl that echoed through the chapel like a primal declaration.

Lucas stepped forward, eyes wild with fury. In his hands gleamed a new blade—serrated, ancient, blackened with runes that seemed to writhe across the metal. "If I cannot complete the ritual with five…" he growled, teeth bared, "I will do it with one pure sacrifice!"

He lunged toward Karl, every movement swift, deadly, driven by fanatic obsession.

But Rayen wasn't about to let it happen. He tackled Lucas with all his strength, the two of them crashing into a pew that splintered under the impact. The blade flew from Lucas's hands, spinning across the chapel floor in a deadly arc.

Nico's fingers closed around it. He lifted it, heart pounding. "We end it now!" he shouted, turning toward Karl.

Karl's hands gripped the dagger he still held, pulsing with red light and warmth. He took a deep breath, eyes locked on the

Guardian. “Guardian!” he bellowed.

The massive creature’s head rose, blue eyes glowing brighter. Its chains rattled, scraping against the floor like distant thunder.

“Your master is gone!” Karl shouted, his voice carrying across the chapel, steady and commanding.

He raised the dagger high. “Then bind to me!”

Without hesitation, he plunged the blade into his own chest, just below the shoulder. Warm, sticky blood sprayed across the altar and the stone floor, sizzling as it dripped onto the glowing symbols. Pain shot through him, but he barely noticed. His vision blurred as the red energy of the ritual surged into the Guardian, filling the room with blinding, pulsating light.

The altar exploded with a brilliant, searing flash. Dust and shards of stone flew in every direction. The Guardian let out a roar that shook the chapel to its very foundations.

Then it turned.

Lucas froze, panic cutting through his arrogance. The Guardian charged with a speed and fury impossible for its size. Bones cracked under its massive claws and jaws as it devoured Lucas in a single, swift motion. His scream was cut short, swallowed by the thunderous impact, leaving nothing but silence in its wake.

For a moment, the chapel hung still. The wind died down. Dust settled. Moonlight streamed in across the shattered altar, illuminating Karl, Rayen, Nico, and the towering form of the Guardian now bound to Karl’s will.

The ritual was over.

The Last Escape

The ground beneath the chapel trembled violently. Cracks raced across the stone floor, jagged lines like the earth's own warning. The pit beneath the altar widened with a deafening groan, swallowing pillars and pews alike. Dust, stone, and splintered wood shot into the night sky, and the entire church began to topple into the yawning void below.

"GO!" Karl shouted, voice cutting through the roar of destruction.

Nico and Rayen grabbed him, hauling him clear of the collapsing structure. Alin followed, limping through the thick fog, each step a struggle against fear and exhaustion. Behind them, the chapel collapsed completely, fire and debris shooting high into the night, painting the surrounding graveyard in flickering, hellish light.

They didn't stop running until they reached the open field. Sirens wailed in the distance—police, paramedics. Someone must have seen the explosion of light and called it in.

Karl collapsed to the ground, gasping, his chest still aching. His hand glowed faintly—the mark, the spiral of thorns, burned against his skin. It would never fade. As his vision blurred, a whisper threaded through his mind—not Lucas, not the dead—but something older, eternal, and terrible:

"One gate closed. Seven remain."

A week later, the boys sat together in the hospital, wrapped in blankets, sipping warm soup. Outside, the media spun stories of a "gas explosion" that had destroyed the chapel. The police had sealed off the graveyard, warning locals to stay away.

Robin Williams' body had been recovered, but his death was officially ruled "unsolved." No trace of Lucas remained. No evidence, no explanation. But Karl knew better. He stared at the scar on his palm—the spiral of thorns, pulsating faintly, a constant reminder of the bond he now carried. Every time he looked at it, he felt the weight of what had occurred, the responsibility, and the unseen eyes that had witnessed it all.

Nico handed him back his camera. "It's corrupted," he said, voice low, "every file… except one."
Karl's hands shook as he pressed play.
The video flickered to life, showing the ruined chapel. The shattered altar glowed faintly, remnants of the ritual energy still lingering. The Guardian stood there, massive and imposing, but bound, obedient. And Karl—standing like a sentinel, chest bleeding, dagger in hand, eyes burning with resolve.

Behind him, shadows moved. Flickering, shifting… watching. Shapes too unnatural to be living, too silent to be human. They lingered, patient and waiting.

The screen went black.

Then, words appeared in glowing red, etched as if by some ancient hand:

The Aftershock

The hospital room smelled sharp of antiseptic and faintly of damp linen. Karl lay on a thin mattress, bandaged from wrist to shoulder, stillness masking the chaos in his mind. Machines beeped rhythmically beside him—soft, mechanical, meaningless—while his thoughts spun uncontrollably, replaying the night over and over.

He could still see the church collapsing, stones tumbling into the pit like the earth itself had opened to swallow it whole. He could still feel the dagger slicing into his chest, warm blood spilling across the altar, the pulse of the ritual thrumming through his veins. He could still hear Lucas's scream, sharp and desperate, suddenly silenced, swallowed by the massive jaws of the Guardian.

The mark on his palm had stopped glowing—but it hadn't faded. The spiral of thorns etched into his skin was permanent, a silent reminder of the bond he had forged with something older than time itself.

Detectives came and went, scribbling notes, asking questions. Their voices were calm, professional, but Karl's answers were sparse. "We got lost… something exploded… I don't remember," he murmured each time, eyes fixed on a corner of the ceiling.

The boys were warned not to speak to the press. Their parents

were shaken, faces pale and tired, endlessly reassuring each other that it was over, that everything was safe. The town was buzzing with rumors, confusion, and fear, but the graveyard had become untouchable. Yellow tape cordoned it off, patrols walked the perimeter, and the path to the chapel was blocked.

But the silence that followed the chaos wasn't peaceful. It wasn't relief. It was… waiting. A heavy, patient kind of silence, like the world itself was holding its breath. Shadows seemed thicker in the corners of the room, the faint hum of the city outside suddenly too loud. Even the machines felt muted, as if the air itself had been altered.

Karl's eyes drifted to the window, where the fog hung low over the field. Somewhere in that distance, beyond the patrols and tape, the graveyard waited. The gates had closed… but the whisper remained etched in his mind:

"One gate closed. Seven remain." He clenched his fist, feeling the spiral of thorns press into his skin, and for the first time since that night, he understood: the danger wasn't gone. It had only been delayed. The room felt colder now, quieter. Waiting.

The Silent One

Rayen hadn't spoken in days.

He sat in his hospital bed, slouched and silent, eyes fixed on nothing. Not the pale green walls. Not the rain-streaked window. Just… somewhere far away, in a place no one could reach.

Nico tried to break the silence, leaning over with his phone, scrolling through memes. He nudged Rayen. "Look at this one, it's—"

Rayen didn't react.

Alin brought stacks of comic books, flipping them in front of Rayen's face, even reading aloud the dialogue of the heroes they once loved. Nothing.

Karl sat beside him every night, holding his hand, whispering to him, trying to anchor him back to reality. Still, Rayen remained trapped in that silent, empty world.

But one night, Karl noticed something different.

Rayen was moving. Slowly, deliberately. He wasn't staring into nothing—he was creating.

Dozens of drawings, scattered across the hospital room: napkins from the cafeteria, stray scraps of paper, even etched into the faded bedsheets. His fingers scratched carefully into the underside of the bedframe, leaving lines deep enough to be

seen when the light hit.

Karl leaned closer.

The spiral of thorns.

But not just one.

Seven of them. Each slightly different—twisting, jagged, and alive in a way that made the air seem heavier.

And in the center of all seven, an eye. Wide open. Staring.

It wasn't human. It wasn't even alive, yet it seemed to see Karl, Nico, Alin—everything.

A chill ran down his spine. The same whisper from that night in the chapel flickered in his mind:

"One gate closed. Seven remain."

Karl swallowed. He didn't have to ask. He already knew. The mark on his palm pulsed faintly. The spiral of thorns had been only the beginning.

Something was awakening.

Nico's Footage

Back at home, Nico locked his bedroom door, the soft click of the latch echoing unnaturally in the quiet room. He slid the corrupted SD card from his camera into his laptop, fingers trembling. The air felt heavier, as if the shadows in the corners leaned closer, waiting.

Every file was broken—static, flickers, corrupted frames that jumped and stuttered. But one file remained intact. Nico double-clickedit.

It wasn't the final battle. Not the explosion, not the Guardian, not Karl bleeding at the altar.

It was the night they first returned to the graveyard. The video played, flickering, grainy, the boys' footsteps muted against the crunch of gravel and dead leaves. They approached the chapel, flashlights cutting thin beams through the thick fog.

But behind them… something moved.

A shape. Tall. Impossible. Not Lucas. Not human.

It hovered in the mist, silent, observing. Its outline blurred and twisted with every frame, always just beyond clear focus, shifting closer without stepping.

Nico leaned forward, heartbeat hammering. The figure moved frame by frame, inching closer to the boys, its presence predatory, deliberate.

They had never seen it in real life. Not that night. Not any night. And yet… the footage knew.

Nico froze the final frame. The figure's eyes were hollow, black pits that seemed to pierce through the screen. Its mouth stretched into a smile carved entirely from shadow, impossible and unnatural, like darkness given form.

A chill raced down Nico's spine as the video flickered again. Below the image, text appeared, glitching and warping across the screen, letters rearranging as if struggling to be read:
"He waits in the second gate." Nico's fingers trembled as he pulled the SD card from the laptop. The room suddenly felt colder, smaller. Somewhere in the darkness outside, a branch scraped against the window, slow… deliberate… watching.

The game wasn't over.

The gates were awakening.

The Mark Burns Again

Karl woke with a scream, the sound tearing itself from his chest as though something had been waiting in the shadows to hear it.

His hand throbbed violently. The mark—the spiral of thorns that had once been a faint, harmless scar—now glowed a fierce, pulsing red. Its rhythm matched the hammering of his heart, like it had a life of its own, calling him somewhere he didn't want to go.

Cold sweat dripped down his back as he stumbled out of bed, the darkness in his room heavier than usual, warped, oppressive. The corners stretched unnaturally, shadows pooling in the angles where light should have pushed them back. The air felt thicker, sticky, almost alive.

He ran to the bathroom sink, fumbling for the tap, and splashed icy water on his face. The chill did little to calm him.

Then he looked up.

The mirror didn't reflect him. Not really. Not the way it should.

Instead, he saw a fog-drenched landscape, shadows twisting through a forest of gnarled trees. Shapes flickered between the trunks, too quick to focus, too unnatural to belong. In the distance, a massive stone gate loomed. It was cracked open, a

black mist spilling from the fracture like ink into the sky.

Whispers rippled through the air around him, soft, serpentine, impossible to localize:

"Second… gate… opened…"

Karl blinked rapidly. The forest vanished. The room returned. His reflection stared back, pale and wide-eyed, drenched in sweat.

He gripped the edge of the sink, knuckles white. "It's not over," he whispered, voice raw and trembling.

Then—his phone buzzed violently on the counter, shaking as if it, too, had felt the pulse of the mark.

A message from Nico.

You need to come. Now. It's starting again.

Karl's heart thundered. The spiral on his hand flared brighter, casting a faint red glow across the bathroom tiles. The world outside the door suddenly felt colder, heavier, and alive in a way that had nothing to do with the morning light creeping through the window.

He swallowed hard. Whatever this was—whatever the gates were—it had begun again.

And there was no turning back.

Whisper in the Walls

That night, Karl made his way to Nico's house, the streets slick with recent rain, the mist curling around the dim streetlights. The video footage—the tall shadow, the hollow eyes, the words warning of the second gate—kept replaying in both their minds. Every blink, every pause, seemed to echo that presence.

They spoke in whispers, careful not to disturb the fragile silence of the night. Each word felt weighty, as if even their voices could awaken something waiting.

Then Karl's phone buzzed. Alin's name flashed across the screen with a single, urgent message:

"Come over. You need to see this."

They didn't hesitate. By the time they arrived at Alin's house, a strange, metallic scent hung in the air. The front door creaked as they entered, and Alin led them silently up the stairs to his room.

What they saw stole their breath.

The walls were covered in spirals—hundreds of them. Not drawn with pen or pencil, not painted, but grown. The paint had bubbled and warped, forming raised, vein-like patterns that pulsed faintly, like the walls themselves had a heartbeat. The room seemed alive. The spirals twisted and shimmered in the dim light, casting shadows that slithered across the floor.

"They appeared yesterday," Alin whispered, voice barely audible. "And… I heard something breathing through the walls. Not outside. *Through* them."

A sudden, loud thud came from inside the closet. The sound was sharp, solid, impossible to ignore.

The boys froze, hearts hammering. Karl took a deep breath and stepped forward.

He opened the closet slowly, every creak of the door magnified in the tense silence.

Inside—empty.

But the inside walls of the closet were scarred, scratched deep with more spirals, twisting unnaturally like the marks of something ancient.

Beneath them, etched in dried, darkened blood, were words that made Karl's stomach tighten: *"Gate two bleeds beneath the tree."* The room fell silent again, but now it felt alive, watching. The spirals throbbed faintly, almost imperceptibly, as if they were pulsing in time with Karl's own heartbeat. Outside, the wind rattled the windows. Something was waiting, just beyond the shadows.

And the second gate was calling.

The Book of the Hollow

The next day, Karl moved quietly through the bank building, heart hammering. His father's office was just ahead, and with a carefully rehearsed excuse, Karl slipped past the reception desk without drawing attention. Every creak of the floorboards felt like a warning, every shadow a threat.

He made his way to the back hallway, past rows of filing cabinets and empty offices, until he found the storage room Robin Williams had once used. Dust hung in the air, and the smell of old paper and leather filled the small space.

Behind a tall bookshelf, half-hidden by shadows, Karl spotted it: a leather-bound journal, thick and worn, the cover etched with strange symbols that seemed to writhe in the corner of his vision.

His hands shook as he pulled it free.

The Book of the Hollow.

Flipping through its pages, Karl discovered diagrams of rituals, intricate family trees, and hand-drawn maps. The Williams family had been guarding the Hollow for generations. Feeding it, studying it, maintaining the gates, sacrificing when required, and recording every detail. The enormity of it pressed down on him.

One page listed the gates: seven in total. Each tied to a

different location, a different power. And the second…

A crude map showed a sprawling cemetery, long forgotten. An ancient tree marked the center, gnarled and twisted. Written beneath it:

"Harrow's Grove—second gate."

Karl's eyes widened as he read a note scribbled in the margin, letters spidery and urgent:

"The second gate consumes memories. If you forget who you are, you never leave."

His pulse quickened. This wasn't just a place. It was a trap. A devouring, merciless trap. And someone—or something—was already waiting for them there.

Karl closed the journal, tucking it under his arm. Every instinct screamed at him: the gates were awakening faster than he could prepare for. And the Hollow… was hungry.

Lucas Lives

The next day, Karl moved like a shadow through the bank building, heart hammering against his ribs. Every step felt louder than it should, echoing in the polished hallways. His father's office loomed ahead, and Karl's carefully rehearsed excuse fluttered in his mind like a fragile shield. He slipped past the reception desk, offering a small nod and a smile, praying the clerk didn't look too closely.

Every creak of the floorboards sounded like a warning. Every shadow seemed to twist, like it knew he wasn't meant to be here.

He navigated the back hallway, past rows of filing cabinets and abandoned offices. Dust floated in shafts of light from the high windows, and the faint, musty scent of old paper mingled with the leather polish that had long since dried on the furniture. At the end of the corridor, he found the storage room Robin Williams had once used.

Karl paused. Dust motes danced in the air, catching the sunlight. The room smelled of age and secrecy. Then, half-hidden behind a tall bookshelf, he saw it: a leather-bound journal. Thick, worn, and etched with strange symbols that seemed to writhe when he looked at them from the corner of his eye.

Hands shaking, he pulled it free.

The Book of the Hollow.

He opened it, and pages spilled secrets: diagrams of rituals, sprawling family trees, hand-drawn maps with cryptic notes in margins that seemed to hum with unseen energy. The Williams family had been the Hollow's guardians for generations—feeding it, studying it, maintaining the gates, recording sacrifices when necessary. The weight of centuries pressed down on Karl as he flipped the pages.

One entry listed the gates: seven in total. Each bound to a location, a power, a purpose. And the second…

A crude map unfolded, showing a sprawling, forgotten cemetery. In the center stood an ancient tree, gnarled, twisted, almost alive. Beneath it was written:

"Harrow's Grove—second gate."

Karl's breath caught as he noticed a note scribbled along the edge of the page, spidery letters pressed with urgency:

"The second gate consumes memories. If you forget who you are, you never leave."

A chill ran down his spine. This wasn't just a location—it was a trap. A devouring, merciless snare that could erase anyone who stepped too close. And he knew, with a certainty that made his stomach twist, that someone—or something—was already waiting.

Karl closed the journal slowly, tucking it under his arm. Every instinct screamed at him: the gates were awakening faster than he could hope to prepare for. And the Hollow… it was hungry. He took a deep breath, feeling the pulse of the mark on his palm. It flared faintly, almost impatiently, as if sensing the danger ahead.

The hunt had begun again.

The First Cultist

A substitute teacher arrived at school that Monday: Mr. Bram. He was polite. Too polite. Words slid from his mouth with a practiced calm that didn't match the weight in his eyes. His hands were steady, precise, almost rehearsed.

Karl noticed something else—something that didn't belong. A faint mark on Mr. Bram's wrist, a spiral of thorns barely visible under the cuff of his sleeve. When Karl asked, Mr. Bram's lips curved into a small, knowing smile.

"Old family scar," he said simply, voice flat, but there was a weight in it, a warning Karl didn't yet understand.

That afternoon, Karl couldn't focus on class. He kept glancing at the clock, waiting for the moment to follow.

When the bell rang, he slipped out quietly, trailing Mr. Bram at a careful distance. The teacher walked steadily through town, past familiar streets, and into the woods behind the cemetery.

The trees grew thicker here, shadows pooling at their roots, the mist curling around their trunks like fingers. Karl's pulse raced. Everyinstinctscreamedathimtoturnback—but curiosity, that relentless obsession, pushed him forward.

Among the trees, Mr. Bram stopped at a wooden shed, hidden from the casual eye. Its walls were weathered and blackened with age. Inside, the smell hit Karl first: candle wax, decaying

wood, something coppery and raw.

The interior was filled with strange relics: flickering candles, scattered bones, ceremonial masks, and a photo of Lucas pinned to a wall streaked with dried blood.

Across the walls, a phrase was scrawled again and again, jagged and frantic:

"Second gate. Second gate. The Hollow rises."

Karl's hand shook as he raised his phone and snapped a photo. But when he looked up, his blood froze.

Mr. Bram stood in the doorway, his expression calm, almost amused. The shadows behind him seemed to twist in his presence.

"Isee,"hewhispered,voicelow,dangerous,reverent."Sothe mark chose you too."

Karl's stomach churned. He realized, in that instant, that the Hollow was no longer distant. It had already reached into their lives—and they were trapped in its pull.

Dreams of the Red Gate

Each of the boys began to suffer nightmares.

Not ordinary dreams. Not fleeting images or harmless illusions. These were lucid, living hallucinations that bled into reality, vivid and unrelenting.

Karl saw a forest drenched in red light, trees twisted and blackened like burnt iron. At its heart stood a towering gate, etched with spirals that pulsed like veins. He felt the weight of its presence pressing against his chest, its pull irresistible.

Nico's nightmare clawed at his mind differently. He saw his mother, but her face was stitched shut, eyes blinking through the scars. She whispered over and over:

"He watches…"

Alin's dream was more abstract, but no less horrifying. He walked backward through time, past himself, past the room he slept in, past memories he hadn't yet made. Every step twisted reality, bending it into something unrecognizable, and yet he could not stop.

But Rayen's visions were the clearest, the most precise. He saw the ancient tree first—a gnarled sentinel with roots as black as tar. Beneath it lay a stone circle, etched with the spiral of thorns. Mist clung to the ground, curling like smoke. Something moved in the shadows beneath the roots, waiting.

When the boys woke, trembling and drenched in cold sweat, Rayen's voice was low, urgent, trembling with fear:

"The second gate… is open. And it's calling to us."

Silence followed. The words lingered like smoke in the room. The air felt heavier, charged, as if the world itself were holding its breath.

Karl's hand tingled, the mark on his palm faintly glowing once more.

The Hollow had begun to stir again.

And this time, it wasn't waiting.

Gate Two Opens

The boys followed Rayen's lead through the overgrown path, the air heavy with the scent of decay and damp earth. Harrow's Grove stretched before them like a forgotten scar on the land. Twisted gravestones jutted from the ground at odd angles, broken crosses covered in moss, inscriptions long worn away by wind and rain. Silence pressed down, thick and unnatural, broken only by the occasional rustle of unseen creatures in the underbrush.

At the center of the cemetery, the ancient tree rose like a black sentinel. Its trunk was gnarled and scarred, bark burned and cracked as if by fire. From a hollow in its trunk oozed a black liquid, slow and viscous, like the forest itself was bleeding. The boys exchanged uneasy glances.

Beneath the tree, hidden under layers of dead leaves and soil, something unnatural stirred. They dug carefully, revealing a stone trapdoor, worn smooth with age, but still etched clearly with a spiral—the same thorned spiral that marred Karl's palm.

Karl stepped closer. The mark on his hand flared, red and pulsing, as if sensing the gate's awakening. He reached out, hesitated for just a moment, and then touched the stone.

It dissolved under his fingers, turning to fine, gray ash that scattered with the wind. A cold draft rose from the hollow

below, carrying the faint, metallic scent of memory and fear.

The second gate was open.

Shadows shifted beneath the tree, crawling along the ground as though aware of the boys' presence. The air felt alive, watching, whispering, pulling.

Karl's chest tightened. The spiral on his hand pulsed in sync with the thrum of the gate, and in that instant he knew: whatever waited beyond would not just challenge their bodies. It would challenge their minds, their memories, their very identities.

The Hollow was awake.

And the second gate had called.

The Hollow Tree

Inside, the tunnel was narrow and suffocating, the walls slick with damp moss and dark condensation. The only light came from the red glow of their marks, pulsing faintly, casting long, jagged shadows that danced like living things. Every step echoed unnaturally, as if the tunnel itself were listening.

Strange symbols etched into the stone walls seemed to writhe and pulse like veins, throbbing in sync with the boys' heartbeat. Karl could feel them tugging at his thoughts, whispering just beyond comprehension.

Then came the whispers.

Soft at first, almost comforting, but growing sharper, layered, urgent. Voices that weren't voices, calling names that weren't theirs. They crawled into their minds, tugging at memories, bending them.

They weren't alone.

Karl realized with a shiver that the tree above wasn't just old. It was alive. Its roots had twisted into grotesque shapes, coiling around skulls half-buried in the earth. Its black liquid seeped through the soil, a slow, viscous hunger that reached into the tunnel, feeding on thoughts, feeding on fear, feeding on the boys themselves.

Suddenly, Alin's panicked shout echoed down the corridor.

"Where are you guys?!"
But no one answered. Not really. Each boy had begun to see false memories, illusions of home, of their families, of things that never happened. The tunnel bent around them, reshaping itself with each thought, each fear.

Karl tried to call to them. Tried to move. But the visions pulled harder, tugging him into a maze of remembered lives that weren't his own.

The gate was not just a portal. It was a trap for the mind.
Forget who you are… and you're gone.
Karl's pulse raced. He clenched his fist, feeling the red mark burn against his skin. He had to hold on—to reality, to the others, to himself.

Because the second gate didn't just feed on souls. It fed on identity.

And it was hungry.

The Trial of the Second Gate

Karl was back in the church.

Not a memory. Not a dream. It felt *present*. The ceiling cracked again. Stone screamed as it collapsed. Firelight flashed. He smelled dust, blood, burning wax. He felt the dagger in his chest, felt himself falling, felt the ground tearing open beneath him.

He tried to scream, but his mouth wouldn't open. Across the void, Nico dropped to his knees. He was younger. Smaller. His hands were slick with blood that wasn't his. His father lay in front of him, eyes glassy, chest unmoving. Nico begged him to breathe. Begged time to rewind. The scene looped, again and again, each time slower, crueler.

Rayen's vision was worse. He was a child again. Small hands. Shallow breaths. Darkness stretching endlessly in front of him. Something grabbed his ankle. Nails dug in. He screamed for his parents, for anyone, as he was dragged screaming into the dark soil beneath the tree.

None of them could hear each other. Except Alin. Alin stood shaking in the tunnel, the whispers clawing at his thoughts. The gate tried to rewrite him. Showed him futures that never happened. Memories that weren't his. A version of

himself that never made it out.

But something snapped.

He remembered the hospital room. Rayen not speaking. Karl's glowing hand. Nico's shaking smile. He remembered the truth.

This place lied.

Alin pulled out his pocket knife and didn't hesitate. He sliced his palm open. Pain exploded. Real pain. Grounding pain.

Blood spilled onto the black root twisting through the tunnel flo o r.

"WE ARE NOT DEAD!" he screamed.

The root shrieked.

The tunnel cracked like glass. The whispers shattered into silence. The false memories burned away, peeling off like rotting skin.

Karl gasped. Nico screamed. Rayen collapsed, sobbing.

They woke at the base of the tree.

Morning light filtered weakly through dead branches. The cemetery was still. Too still.

Then the ground moved.

From the exposed roots, something rose.

Tall. Humanoid. Faceless.

Its body was woven from bark and sinew, veins made of crawling vines, fingers ending in long, jagged thorns dripping black sap. No eyes. No mouth. Yet it *watched* them.

The air vibrated as it spoke, its voice like roots grinding through stone.

"The second gate is fed."

The boys couldn't move.

"The third shall bleed soon."

The creature sank back into the earth, roots sealing over it

like a wound closing.

The tree stood silent again.

Karl looked at his hand. The mark burned hotter than ever.

Two gates down.

Five still waiting.

And whatever was coming next wouldn't hide in dreams anymore.

The Sixth Watcher

As they stumbled through the tangled roots and underbrush of Harrow's Grove, hearts pounding, Karl's hand still pulsed with the red mark. Every shadow seemed alive, every rustle a warning.

Then, blocking their path, a figure stepped out.

Tall. Silent. Cloaked in a black hoodie that swallowed her form.

A mark glowed faintly on her neck, a spiral that pulsed like theirs, red and throbbing. Karl froze.

"I've been tracking the gates too," the girl said, voice calm but edged with steel. "Name's Mira."

The boys exchanged uncertain glances.

Mira pulled a folded, worn map from her backpack and spread it on a fallen log. The paper was old, creased, marked with spirals and sigils, lines connecting distant locations.

"I'm from another family," she said, tracing a finger over the third gate's location. "We used to guard the third gate. But… something changed. One of our own betrayed us. Lucas… he was just the first. He opened the Hollow, and now it's awake."

Rayen swallowed hard. "Awake… like the second gate?"

She nodded. "Yes. And it's spreading. Faster than anyone expected."

Her finger moved across the map again, stopping at each symbol. Seven gates in total. Two fed. Five remain.

"There are only four months left," Mira said, eyes burning. "Before the Hollow opens entirely. If we don't close the remaining gates, it won't just consume memories—it will consume everything. Towns. Cities. The world."

Karl's stomach twisted. Four months. Five gates. And every second counted.

Nico spoke first, voice shaky. "Then… we don't have time to waste."

Mira folded the map, slipping it into her backpack. "Then we start now. You've survived the second gate. That mark chose you. You're part of this—whether you like it or not."

Karl clenched his fists. The weight of responsibility pressed down harder than ever. They weren't just fighting for themselves anymore. They were fighting for everyone.

The forest seemed to hum around them. The Hollow was awake. And now, with Mira guiding them, the race against time had begun.

We Are the Chosen

That night, under a sky choked with clouds, the boys and Mira gathered in a circle on the edge of the town. Their breaths came in ragged bursts, the air cold and sharp, carrying the scent of earth, rain, and something older—something watching.

They weren't just survivors anymore. Not after the second gate. Not after the horrors they had seen, the false memories, the humanoid guardian.

They were chosen.

Not by chance. Not by luck.

But by the Hollow itself.

Karl looked at his friends—Nico, Alin, Rayen—and then at Mira. Their eyes, wide with fear but burning with determination, mirrored the same thought. They had seen what happened when the gates were fed. They had felt the pull of the Hollow. They had *touched it*.

"If these gates are going to open…" Karl said, his voice steady, though it trembled with the weight of truth, "…then we close them. One by one."

Nico nodded, swallowing. "And if it tries to fight back?"

"We fight harder," Mira said, her tone sharp as a blade. "It wants us broken, scattered, afraid. It doesn't win if we remember who we are."

A cold wind swept through the empty streets, rattling the windows, whispering through the cracks in the walls. Somewhere, far off, a bell rang once, hollow and low, like a warning from another world.

The boys shivered. The Hollow was watching. Waiting. Counting.

But now, so were they.

And in that moment, beneath the looming shadow of Harrow's Grove, with the night pressing in and the marks burning faintly on their skin, the war had just begun.

No longer children. No longer bystanders. They were the sentinels of the gates, the last line against a hunger older than memory itself.

And the Hollow would know their names.

To be Continued...

About the Author

Rehan Azam is a passionate storyteller, screenwriter, and creator who specializes in horror, drama, and mystery fiction. Known for blending suspense with emotional depth, Rehan crafts stories that linger long after the final page. The Graveyard and the Robin Williams is one of his most gripping works, inspired by haunting real-life whispers and the power of friendship in the face of darkness.

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